



Aethiopica 1 (1998)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Review

SVEN RUBENSON (ed.), *Tewodros and his Contemporaries 1855-1868*

Aethiopica 1 (1998), 263–264

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

SVEN RUBENSON (ed.), *Tewodros and his Contemporaries 1855-1868 = Acta Æthiopica II*. Coedited by AMSALU AKLILU, MERID WOLDE AREGAY and SAMUEL RUBENSON. Lund, Sweden; Addis Ababa University Press and Lund University Press, 1994. xxvii + 379 pages; cloth. Price ca. SK 456.

Having comprised 250 documents (letters and treaties) on the era of Emperor Tewodros II, this volume stands as the most comprehensive of its kind. Letters and treaties have always been used as a historical evidence. CONTI ROSSINI, GUIDI, ULLENDORFF, PANKHURST, SERGEW, SAYFU and many other scholars have published individual documents or a cluster of them at a time in the academic journals and as appendices to their treatises. An exception to this practice is the monograph – “The Amharic Letters of Emperor Theodore of Ethiopia to Queen Victoria and Her Special Envoy” – by GIRMA-SELASSIE ASFAW and DAVID L. APPELYARD (Oxford 1979). But this work, as its title shows, pertained to a particular theme just like the sets of letters which appeared in many periodicals. A comprehensive and systematic compilation was attempted at first in the mid 1980s when the School of Oriental and African Studies in London initiated a new trend by publishing with the help of the British Academy a monograph consisting of Ethiopian letters of the first half of the nineteenth century. Cf. *Letters from Ethiopian Rulers of early and mid-nineteenth century*. Translated by DAVID APPELYARD from Ge'ez and Amharic and A.K. IRVINE from Arabic and annotated by RICHARD K.P. PANKHURST with an Appendix by BAIRU TAFLA (Oxford 1985). One limitation, if not a weakness, of this monograph is that the documents are drawn mainly from British archives.

Acta Æthiopica on the other hand aspires to pull together the original Ethiopian documents and/or their copies and translations of as many archives and libraries as possible, regardless of whether or not the documents have been previously published. Hence, it forms de facto a convenient set of documentary handbooks for students of Ethiopian studies. It is strictly chronological in organization and aims at covering a long period of time, though the beginning of the nineteenth century is arbitrarily set as the starting point.

The aim of the series, as the editor-in-chief put it on page ix of the first volume, “... is to supply a chronicle series of Ethiopian documents, i.e. correspondence, treaties, etc., in their original languages for the benefit of linguists, historians, and other scholars who know these languages, and provide

English translations for those who do not". The second volume, which is the focus of this note of appreciation, seems, however, not quite in conformity with this declaration of intention. The English translation is certainly provided for in any case, but the declared policy of reproducing the documents "... in their original languages" seems to have been neglected in such cases as Italian (docs. 17, 18, etc.), Latin (doc. 86), French (docs. 143, 203) and Greek (docs. 10 and 11). These may not be of a special interest to the linguist, but the historian may not be satisfied with a translation, and still less with a translation of a translation, when examining the addressees' understanding of the message.

The work is nonetheless exemplary in the arrangement of the documents, the clarity of the facsimile, the accuracy of the commentaries and the quality of the translation in which the editor was assisted by two outstanding Ethiopian scholars and his own son who is an academic in his own right. The documents are mostly in Amharic; others are in Ge'ez (e.g. docs. 9, 36, 96), Arabic (e.g. docs. 4, 23, 26, etc.), Italian (e.g. docs. 36, 44, 75, 87, etc.), French (e.g. docs. 118, 119), and English (e.g. docs. 63, 83, 117, etc.). A few are represented only in translation (e.g. docs. 13, 57, 88, etc.), the originals having been known to be lost or could not be located. Each document is commented upon and adequately catered for with references. An introductory chapter gives a bird's-eye view of the set-up while some eighteen seals are reproduced and briefly commented at the beginning. Access to the 406 page book is facilitated by the detailed table of contents and the three indices: firstly, an authors' index which consists of 19 names of persons who composed the documents; secondly, persons mentioned in the footnotes and texts, and finally the countries, districts, places and peoples mentioned in the book are compiled together. The editor who is well known to students of Ethiopian history and his co-editors are to be commended for this serviceable contribution, and the academic world will be all the more grateful if the next volume, which should logically cover the periods of Takla Giyorgis and Yohannes IV, appears in print in the foreseeable future.

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